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1 Corinthians 14:20-37



1 Corinthians - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses 1 Corinthians 14:20-37, where Paul addresses the role of spiritual gifts in the church, emphasizing the importance of edifying one another rather than seeking personal blessings, and the use of understandable language to communicate effectively. The passage quotes Isaiah 28, referring to God's gradual and progressive method of teaching, and the limited effectiveness of speaking in tongues in conveying the gospel to unbelievers. The importance of orderly conduct and the existence of recognized interpreters and prophets in the early church is highlighted, as is the controversy and varying interpretations of Paul's command for women to keep silent in churches.

Transcript

I'm always disappointed when I can't break a session at the end of a chapter. In 1 Corinthians, there have been a number of times in this course that I've had to break before a chapter is complete. I don't suppose there's any real damage done by doing so.

It's just a disappointment because it looks so neat on the tape labels. If you've got a whole bunch of chapters, it's just a disappointment. I'm not sure why we have complete chapters covered instead of picking up now at verse 20 of chapter 14.

But so it is, and that's what reality we're living with. Now, that means, of course, that I have to bring us up to speed because it was yesterday that we were in chapter 14, and a lot of things have happened since then in our lives, and we need to get back our minds geared into this. We are in this latter part of chapter 14.

Actually, we have exactly half of it to cover. We covered half of it yesterday and half to go. We have the conclusion of Paul's extended discussion that began at the beginning of chapter 12 about spirituality, and particularly the role of the spiritual gifts in the spiritual life of the believer and of the church.

The church in particular. Paul is mostly concerned about the well-being of the church. Quite obviously, the well-being of the church is connected inseparably with the well-being spiritually of individuals in the church, but Paul is saying that it's not enough that

individuals are edified.

The church is to be edified as well. At least that is what is supposed to be going on when the church is gathered. We understand, I hope, that we are the church whether we're gathered or not.

When God looks down on the earth, he sees a body. He sees a bride. He sees what we would have to call the true church every day of the week even when they're not gathered.

Of course, probably at every moment of every day there's somewhere in the world some Christians gathered, but even when we personally are not gathered, we are part of the church. But when the church gathers, it is for special reasons. When we're not gathered, we live life in the ordinary world, but we live it as Christians and we live it to the glory of God.

But when we gather together, there's special reasons for doing so, for mutual encouragement and for teaching and for corporate worship and so forth. But Paul indicates that when the church gathers, the principal reason for doing so is to edify one another. And the result is if there's a mutual edification going on, then I will be edified.

I don't have to be concerned about going there in order to edify me if I'm going there to edify the church at large and so is everybody else. I'm part of the church that's going to get edified. So Paul considers that the reason for gathering is not just to get your own blessing, but to corporately participate in the giving of a blessing and the receiving of a blessing, which the whole church together will experience, which is an argument for continuing to attend church, even if you don't feel like you're getting personally blessed.

And that is all too often the case. People stop going to churches because they're not getting a blessing out of it. I personally believe that you should never abandon the assembling of yourselves together, even if in many cases when you assemble, you're not personally learning anything or getting anything out of it.

Your presence there and what you have to offer, assuming that there is a forum for you to offer something in a gathering, is going to perhaps help somebody else. And that's a good enough argument for your being there, which is why I go to church. And I must say that many times I've been in churches that I don't particularly get anything out of.

And if the whole reason for going to church was for me to get edified, I guess I wouldn't go anywhere near as often as I do. But I consider that each person's presence contributes to the manifestation of the body of Christ corporately and increases the likelihood that there's going to be a variety of kinds of blessings that can be had corporately by the church at large, even if it's just the money I put in the offering. That's a ministry.

And if I wasn't at church, they wouldn't get that. So, you know, assembling with the saints is a regular and important thing for Christians. It says in Hebrews, not in Hebrews 10, not to forsake the assembling together of Christians.

And Paul assumes that the Corinthians do this, but when many of them are doing it, their mentality is that they just want to go. We would have to guess either to get blessed or to show off. Now, Paul doesn't say which is their motivation.

Perhaps he doesn't consider himself to be in the position to judge their hearts about this. Their behavior certainly is not as it should be and is not bringing about the results that a meeting should bring about. What he seems to be trying to correct is a mentality of persons going and simply.

It sounds from the instructions and restrictions it gives that they're speaking in tongues a great deal, possibly many at the same time. Now, I have heard teachers say that they felt like what was going on in the church of Corinth was almost a competition to shout each other down and to outdo each other in showing how they could speak in tongues and so forth. And I used to wonder whether that was really possible, whether any Christians could really be that immature and whether this scenario that some teachers had painted could conceivably have been what was really going on in Corinth.

And I once went to a meeting, and it actually was not a Pentecostal meeting. In fact, it was a meeting that did not affirm speaking in tongues. It was a quasi-cultic meeting.

It was a Christian in most respects, but it was led by a leader who's kind of a cult-type figure. And these people were all professing believers in Christ, and part of the meeting was that some people would spontaneously stand up and read something from the Scripture. And I guess one of the practices that had developed among them was that groups of people sitting together would stand up and in unison read the same passage of Scripture together for the benefit of the whole assembly.

However, this gathering that I was invited to attend and did was totally chaotic, because there were groups of people standing up together to read a Scripture in one part of the room, and in another part of the room, another group was standing up to read another passage of Scripture out loud, and they were doing it at the same time, and even though, I mean, you can imagine how this might happen accidentally. Some people stand up and they didn't realize this group was going to stand up. But even though this group was reading something, this other group nearby was reading something else, and they'd literally be shouting, trying to out-shout each other, so that what they were reading would be heard above what the other people were reading.

And this was the characteristic of the meeting. I mean, this kind of thing was going on. I guess there are people that are carnal.

I guess there are people that are out of touch with what the Spirit of God does when He's in charge of a meeting. There are people who do not know that God is not a God of confusion, but of peace, and it's possible that the Corinthians were making the same mistake. To what degree they were, we cannot say, but Paul seems to indicate that, you know, it may be hypothetical, but he says in verse 23, Therefore, if the whole church comes together in one place, and all are speaking in tongues, and the implication is apparently all at the same time, and there comes in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? Now, whether he's describing what is actually happening in Corinth, or maybe a situation worse than what they were actually facing, but one that their practices could lead to this extreme, I don't know.

But I have certainly myself been in meetings where the gifts were manifested in such a way as to, if I were more critical, I would have to say they were out of their minds, but maybe they even were, but I don't know. In any case, Paul is trying to give instructions here to bring about order in the church, and to discover the right use of the gifts. He has said in chapter 13 that any use of the gifts without love is worthless, and that doesn't mean that you should throw out the gifts and have love instead, but that the gifts are given to serve one another in love with.

Therefore, when you come together and you have something to say, make sure you're doing it for the sake of edifying others, not just getting attention for yourself or getting a blessing for yourself. And he's been saying that, for instance, in the last two verses we read last time, verse 18 and 19, he says, I thank my God I speak in tongues more than you all. So he affirms that tongues is a good thing.

He does it himself a great deal. Yet in the church, meaning when the church is gathered, I would rather speak five words with my understanding that I might teach others also than 10,000 words in a tongue. There are different personalities and temperaments in the church, and I know some people who would much rather speak 10,000 words unintelligibly in the church because they get a high of some kind off it, than to speak five intelligible words.

But Paul was more, I would have to say, had more, put a higher premium on rationality in the church than some of the more emotionally based types did. And although he might speak 10,000 words in an unknown tongue in his prayer closet, in the church, he had no use for doing so. As far as we know, he never really spoke in tongues in a public setting.

We have no record of it. You know, it's interesting that he said he spoke in tongues more than they all did. And that's an amazing thing when you think about how little he had to say about it anywhere else.

I mean, he never spoke about speaking in tongues elsewhere. You never read of it in the book of Acts, him being involved in speaking in tongues. He must have done it, but he

almost never talked about it.

It wasn't something that he drew attention to in his own life. He mentions it here because he seems to be putting the clamps, to a certain extent, on the practice of speaking in tongues in the church in Corinth. And those who thought of speaking in tongues as a mark of true spirituality might have disregarded his instructions, thinking, Oh, well, Paul's just jealous because he doesn't speak in tongues.

He's a doctrinal kind of guy. He doesn't maybe have this gift and so he devalues it and he doesn't realize that speaking in tongues is the true mark of real spirituality. Well, he certainly deflates any argument of that kind that any might seek to raise against him by saying, I speak in tongues more than you all.

He is not lacking in that gift. However, his attitude is that it's not all that important in the church to do so. Now, to edify yourself privately, there's nothing wrong with that.

But in the church, there's no use for it unless there's an interpretation. He's been saying that all along. Now, verse 20, Brethren, do not be children in understanding, however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

Now, what he's saying is perhaps the same thing he was saying at the end of chapter 13. When that which is mature has come, that which is in part will be done away. Chapter 13, verse 10.

And then in verse 11, he had said, when I was a child, I spoke as a child. I understood as a child. I thought as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

One thing he has put away is childish understanding. He has no doubt replaced it with a more mature understanding. And now he tells them to be the same way in understanding, be mature.

Now, it's okay to be babes with reference to malice. When it comes to sin, it's a wonderful thing to maintain your innocence and your naivete. There's certainly nothing wrong with being uninformed about how raunchy the world is behaving itself.

In fact, Paul said elsewhere that, I think in Ephesians 5, it's a shameful thing even to speak of the things that they do in secret. You don't have to be ashamed if you don't get it when someone tells a dirty joke. When I was in high school, I was fairly sheltered in my family.

I didn't understand or get all the jokes that I heard. However, I have to say, before I was filled with the Spirit, it was a little embarrassing to me that I didn't. I thought, gosh, I'm so naive.

I don't want anyone to know it. And I always acted like I got it, which is a really stupid

thing to do, of course. But it was because I didn't understand there's nothing shameful about being babes with reference to evil.

In fact, it's to one's credit if they have not delved the depths of sin and so forth, and if they have not become savvy to all the corruption of the world. But with reference to spiritual understanding, there's no value in being a babe in that respect. Just being uninformed or having failed to grow in your knowledge is not commendable.

Verse 21, in the law it is written. Now here we see the word law used in one of the ways that Paul uses it. He uses the word a lot of ways, but the quote he gives us from Isaiah, which is not in what we would call the law.

We think of the law either as the Ten Commandments or of the greater body of statutes and things that God gave in the Old Testament, or sometimes of the Pentateuch as a whole. The first five books, the Torah, are also called the law. And Paul uses, by the way, the word law all those ways in his writings, various ways you find in different contexts he uses the word law.

Here, however, as also he does in Romans chapter 3, he uses the word law to mean simply the whole Old Testament. The whole Old Testament he's referring to as the law. He does that, as I say, also in Romans 3, where he quotes, I think it's four or five scriptures from the Psalms, and one from Isaiah, and calls that what the law teaches.

He doesn't quote one thing from what the Torah says in that passage. He quotes from the Psalms and from the prophets and he calls that the law. Here he also quotes from Isaiah and he refers to that as the law.

So I would just put you on your guard that when you find the word law, it can mean, depending on context, any number of things. In this case, even the whole Old Testament, including the prophets, because it is from the books of the prophets that you hear quotes, yet he refers to it as the law. And the law is written, with men of other tongues and other lips, I will speak to this people, and yet for all that, they will not hear me.

The quote is from Isaiah 28, verses 11 and 12, and it doesn't really resemble completely the quote as it would appear if you happen to turn to that passage. In Isaiah 28, verses 11 and 12, it would not read quite like this. It does, in the Masoretic text and in the Septuagint, speak of God speaking to this people with men of other languages unknown to them.

But the quote is not precisely like the Septuagint or the Masoretic text. It's not known exactly what version Paul is quoting from. He might even be paraphrasing.

But the passage in Isaiah, in the context, would not give you the impression that Isaiah is talking about the gift of tongues, though Paul clearly is applying it to the gift of tongues

here. What actually is being said in Isaiah 28 is a bit confusing because, well let me turn you there. There are theories, a number of theories, including some prevailing ones among scholars, about what is really going on in these verses in Isaiah 28 because if we start at verse 9, we have what appears to be, or what some believe to be, the words of Isaiah's critics about himself.

Saying, whom will he teach knowledge? Meaning, his critics saying, who will Isaiah teach knowledge to? And to whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? Those babies? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little. For with stammering lips and another tongue I will speak to this people. To whom he said, this is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest, and this is the refreshing, yet they would not hear.

Now you'll notice that Paul quoted the last part of verse 11 and the last line of verse 12 in his quotation from this. But it says in verse 13, but the word of the Lord was to them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they might go and fall backward and be broken and snared and cut. Now, taken just at face value, Isaiah could be the one asking the question in verse 9, and whom will he teach knowledge? I mean, whom will God teach knowledge to? His answer is those who have been weaned.

Those who are not just babes, he'll teach his, like Paul said, we teach wisdom among those who are mature. Isaiah could be saying something like that. Well, who will God teach his wisdom to? Well, those who are a little more than babes, those who have, by reason of use, have their senses exercised good and evil.

And God's teaching of men will be line upon line, precept upon precept. In other words, he doesn't just dump the whole load on you at once, but he gives it to you in bite-sized bits. Now, that's not the way, however, most scholars believe the passage to be understood.

As I mentioned before reading it, they understand verse 9 to be Isaiah's critics speaking about him. Who will Isaiah teach knowledge? They're defiant. They're implying that he can't teach them anything.

Maybe he could teach newborn babies, newly weaned infants something. He's not profound. He's not sophisticated.

His message is suited for babies, not for such wise men as us, is the impression that some feel he's giving here. And both places, verse 10 and verse 13, that have this awkward statement, precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, hear little, dare little. It is thought that the words in the English, as they've been trusted, are not relevant, but the sound of the Hebrew words are what is

going on here.

That this is, in the Hebrew, it sounds like baby talk. In fact, that it sounds perhaps a little bit like a baby trying to recite the Hebrew alphabet. Now, whether this theory is correct or not, no one knows.

It's one of those things that almost all the commentators want to make sure that they let you know that they're aware of it. Because that must be what you're supposed to think about this passage. But, in the Hebrew, these words in verse 10 and verse 13, which are in quotations, are Now, I never heard a baby that sounded like that.

But, it is said the sound of the words is like that of a child trying to recite his Hebrew ABCs, as it were. And what they're doing is, they're not saying, the message of these verses has nothing to do with the words as they're translated into English. But rather, the critics of Isaiah are trying to mock him, as if they're mimicking his own words.

Like, let him teach babies. We will not listen to a word too mature, too sophisticated. We have nothing to learn from him.

And his words are merely like a baby reciting his alphabet. Maybe. If that is what is going on here, then his statement, Now, stammering lips would possibly refer to Isaiah's own speech.

Or it might be equivalent to other tongues. The speaking to this people with another tongue is a reference, most feel, to that of the Assyrians, or the Babylonians, I mean, depending on which God is referring to here, it's possibly speaking about the Assyrians, because it's early enough in Isaiah that the Assyrians were still a problem. And basically, bringing men of other tongues, namely the Assyrians, against Jerusalem, God was trying to get something across to them.

He's trying to tell them they're under judgment. He's speaking to them with men of other tongues. And yet, they don't hear him.

And the thought would possibly be, well, you might think I'm just a stammerer. You might think that I'm using baby talk, and that you, you know, it's too simple. Well, God's going to speak in words that aren't so simple.

Words you can't understand. Words that are over your heads, as it were. Men with other languages you don't know.

And yet, even then, you won't respond. You don't respond to the simplicity of my message, and you won't respond even when God uses words that are more challenging for you to understand at your level. The passage is difficult, hard to understand.

And what's even more difficult is to know why Paul quoted from it in the context he did.

All through the New Testament, you find the New Testament writers quoting from the Old Testament. And in many cases, it is curious.

Why did they choose that Old Testament passage to make this particular point? When you look back at the passages in the Old Testament and say, quote, sometimes it doesn't seem that relevant. But in many cases, you can, by looking back at the context and getting under the skin of the apostles a little more, you can figure out why they thought that applicable. And they were right, by the way, because Jesus gave his understanding, he opened their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures.

The apostles certainly understood the scriptures correctly. The question is, why was that the correct understanding of that particular passage? And in most cases, I have at least been able to satisfy myself that I have discovered why Paul or James or someone thought that that scripture applied to this situation. I could see their reasoning, although not always instantly.

Sometimes just by trying to understand their thinking more thoroughly, I could get it. I have yet to understand why Paul used this particular scripture with reference to the gift of speaking in tongues. When in Isaiah, it's almost certainly referring to men of other tongues, or the Assyrians.

However, Paul might be quoting it in order to say that people who are committed to unbelief, speaking in tongues does not change their mind. Speaking in languages they don't know didn't change the mind of the Jews who were surrounded by the Assyrians. Speaking in these languages they didn't know God was actually trying to get to them, but they weren't listening.

And the presence of barbarians, people who didn't speak their language, it didn't change their hearts, didn't change their minds. Now, what he might be saying is, speaking in tongues in a way is like that. It might impress you, you might feel like you're showing how spiritual you are, but if an unbeliever comes in, it's not going to impress him, it's not going to change his heart.

Even for all that, he's not going to believe. Now, if that is why Paul is bringing it up, and if that's the connection, let me show you how that interacts with the following verse. Verse 22 and following.

Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers. But prophecy is not for unbelievers, but for those who believe. Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is judged by all, and thus the secrets of his heart are revealed, and so falling down on

his face, he will worship God, and report that God is truly among you.

Or as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, when the secrets of their hearts were revealed, they fell down too, but not to report that God was with them, they fell down dead. But the point is, prophecy has this function. By the way, just as an aside, remember when we were talking about the gifts in chapter 12, and I mentioned what Paul refers to as the word of knowledge, might not be what we are familiar with calling the word of knowledge in the charismatic movement, that is the ability to know something supernaturally about somebody that you could not know naturally about them.

The argument I gave for maybe looking beyond the charismatic traditional definition of that word, is that, I said, that ability to know something about someone is actually associated with the gift of prophecy, both in the Old and the New Testament. It was prophets who had that ability, many times, and when Jesus exhibited that ability with the woman, she said, Sir, I see you're a prophet, because he knew something about her, he could see it. And here, it would appear to vindicate my point, because Paul says, when people prophesy, an unbeliever would be convicted because the secrets of his heart are exposed.

It sounds like what we're calling a word of knowledge. What we typically call a word of knowledge is when someone exposes, by supernatural revelation, what's in another person's heart, what they only know. For God exhibits his knowledge of the secrets of the individual, and reveals it to another party so that they can speak it out.

We normally call that a word of knowledge. That appears to be what Paul calls prophecy. I mean, it's at least one of the functions of prophecy.

So that may support what I was saying earlier. Paul says, if all are prophesying, it's going to convict people, because the secrets of their hearts are going to be revealed, and they're going to say, Wow, God is truly here. I remember being in a meeting once, by the way, I've been in many meetings where people prophesied over the years, but a lot of times, when someone prophesies, you think, That's not real, or that is real, or sometimes you think, Maybe, maybe not, it's hard to tell.

A lot of prophecies are kind of non-risky prophecies. Someone just, as it were, strings a bunch of King James phrases together that are orthodox enough, because they're taken right from the Bible, but they put them in some original arrangement, and say, Thus saith the Lord. And, you know, maybe that's what the Lord is saying, maybe it's not.

I mean, he said it in the Bible, so he might be saying it now. But, on the other hand, that might not be a word in season in the church. That might just be someone who wanted to speak in the church, and there are people who can rattle off a prophecy in every church, and never prophesy anything that can be tested.

Never prophesy anything that you could really hook something on, and say, yeah, that's clearly a prophecy. It might be good stuff. But to know whether it's a revelation, or just something that came out of the mind of the person speaking, is often difficult.

Well, I remember I was in a meeting once where it seemed like the presence of the Spirit of God was really clearly there. And a person prophesied, and I don't even remember what the prophecy was about, but I remember in particular, my own reaction when I heard the prophecy was, wow, that just bears witness that that really is from the Lord. And I'm not quick to make that decision in favor of prophecy, but I just felt like, wow, that really is the Lord.

I just really feel that's the Lord. And what I thought was interesting was immediately after the prophet stopped speaking, and there was a bit of silence so people could either speak or pray or whatever, a person sitting next to the person who prophesied, whom I knew to be a visiting unbeliever, prayed out and said, God, I thank you that you are here in our midst. Or something like that.

And I thought of this passage exactly. If everyone prophesied, the unbeliever is going to confess that God is in your midst. And it was precisely what this unbeliever actually acknowledged.

After the prophecy was given, I thought, well, a more graphic illustration of what Paul said here could hardly be imagined. Now, the problem with these verses, especially verses 22 and 23. Well, through 24, I guess.

There is a problem. And depending on how we solve the problem, it may impact our earlier discussion about why Paul quoted Isaiah 28 there. The problem is that in verse 22, Paul says tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers.

But prophesying is not for unbelievers, but for those who believe. And this would indicate, of course, that tongues then would have a positive function in the presence of unbelievers because it's a sign for them. It's not for believers.

It's for unbelievers. It's a sign for them. Whereas prophecy would function mainly to the advantage of the church, not to the advantage of unbelievers.

OK, well, that's if that statement stood by itself, I'd have no problem whatsoever with it. And I frankly don't have a serious problem with it. But the problem arises because the next verse sounds like he contradicts that.

The next verse indicates that if an unbeliever is present, it's better for all to be prophesying because the person be convicted and fall down and repent than for all to be speaking in tongues, which would just make him think everyone's mad, you know. And, you know, that sounds like the opposite of what he should say. If tongues is, in fact, for the benefit of unbelievers, then it should be better if unbelievers are present for

everyone to speak in tongues.

And if prophecy is not for unbelievers, but for believers, then it should be inappropriate to prophesy in the presence of unbelievers or at least you shouldn't expect any results. And yet Paul said that's what the results would be. He seems to say just the opposite thing in verses 23 and 24 as what he said in verse 22.

This has not gone unnoticed. Almost anyone who reads carefully the book of 1 Corinthians has snagged themselves on this. Some have gone so far as to just change verse 22 arbitrarily without manuscript support for it.

For instance, J.B. Phillips in the J.B. Phillips translation of the New Testament, he just flat out changes verse 22. And he has Paul say, therefore tongues are for a sign not to those who are unbelievers, but to believers. Whereas prophecy is not for believers, but for those who do not believe.

Notice he just switches things around arbitrarily in verse 22 so that they'll conform more naturally with what he says in verses 23 and 24. Now J.B. Phillips, when he does this, he puts a footnote there and it says see appendix in the back and he has a special appendix about this very set of verses. He said, this is the only place in my translation that I've just high-handedly and without textual justification, I've just changed the text.

He says, I did so because Paul obviously made a slip of the pen or a copyist error has occurred or something and it's obvious from the context that he meant this instead of that. Now those possibilities are not impossible. It is possible that we have here a textual corruption, but the problem is we don't have any manuscripts that bear witness to textual corruption here.

They all say this. And I as a translator would not want to just turn it around arbitrarily because I felt that'd be an easier thing to explain. I have usually explained this difficulty as follows.

That tongues can in fact be a sign for unbelievers. Believers don't need signs. It's a wicked and adulterous generation that seeks after a sign and therefore tongues is a sign.

At least in some settings, in some uses tongues can be a sign. But it's not a sign to get believers to believe because believers already believe. It's a sign for unbelievers who do not yet believe and an example of what Paul's talking about could be seen in the day of Pentecost because the speaking in tongues there was a case where unlearned Galileans spoke in a variety of languages they'd never learned and those in Jerusalem who were pilgrims there for the Feast of Pentecost, hearing their own languages spoke by those that they recognized to be men of no linguistic scholarship.

They knew, it testified to them something supernatural was going on and then got their attention and of course led to them hearing the gospel from Peter and many of them

being converted, 3,000 of them. Now that we could say was a case where tongues certainly served as a sign to unbelievers and I've generally argued that that's what Paul means here is that tongues, at least some of the time, can be a sign for unbelievers. Now when it's in the church it's not to be a sign to the believers, it's there to minister to the believers with an interpretation.

It's there to instruct or to give a revelation of some kind but not just to serve the purpose as a sign. But I must confess this explanation does not clearly explain why he says in the second part of the verse that prophecy is not for unbelievers but for those who believe since he goes on to say that unbelievers can benefit from hearing prophecy. I then, in my traditional understanding of this, said that when Paul, in verse 23, indicated the church should not all be speaking in tongues when an unbeliever comes in, this does not contradict what he said earlier about tongues can be a sign for unbelievers because after all, even though it can be a sign in some cases, it can also convey the wrong information if it's in disorderly usage.

I mean if people come in and everyone's screaming out in tongues at the same time it just seems like a madhouse and it's not going to serve its required and intended purpose of being a sign to these unbelievers except it's going to be a sign of insanity. And therefore, Paul, as I have commonly understood this, is saying God intended that tongues could serve as a sign to unbelievers to help confirm the gospel, but the way the Corinthians are doing it, all of them speaking at the same time and in disarray and so forth is not going to have that effect. It's going to have the opposite effect.

Namely, that people are going to think you're crazy. Now there are some problems with this way of looking at it because although what I've just said does give a plausible explanation of what Paul says about tongues there and can harmonize the thoughts, I have not really given a corresponding explanation of what Paul said about prophecy and that problem still remains by this explanation because Paul does say in verse 22, prophecy is not for unbelievers. But then he goes on and very clearly says if unbelievers come in and everyone's prophesying, then they'll be convicted and that's a good thing.

They'll acknowledge that God's in your midst. And so my explanation, which I've usually given, only serves half of the material. It doesn't really explain the other half and therefore it is deficient in that respect and remains open, leaves open the need to find an explanation of those parts.

Now I'm acquainted with another explanation which, to my mind, doesn't fit the wording quite as well but fits the idea, possibly. And let me give you this as an alternative. Verse 22, when he says, Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers.

He's, of course, speaking from the Isaiah passage he quoted in the previous verse. That's why he says, therefore. He's quoted a verse from Isaiah.

In the verse in Isaiah, it says, Even though God's going to speak to you with tongues you don't understand, which he intends to be a sign to you, yet you're not going to believe. Therefore, Paul says, from that verse we can deduce that even if God does supernatural things or gives them signs such as speaking in tongues, these people are confirmed in their unbelief. And tongues keeps people out.

It doesn't change people. Tongues is a sign to people who are confirmed unbelievers and they remain unbelievers, whereas prophecy produces believers. This is how some people understand it when you say prophecy is for believers.

He doesn't say it's a sign for believers, but he said prophecy is for unbelievers. And not for unbelievers, but for those who believe. The idea being, by this explanation, is prophecy is for the purpose of producing believers.

Tongues is for the purpose of condemning people who are confirmed in their unbelief. And then he goes on to explain how that people, if they come in and they are unbelievers and hear you speak in tongues, it's not going to convert them. It's not going to bring them out of their unbelief.

Tongues is, in a sense, a way of condemning those who are already confirmed in their unbelief, as in Isaiah. The people of Israel were already confirmed as unbelievers. God was going to only further condemn them by giving them signs that would not convert them.

The more signs God gives, the more culpable they are for their unbelief. The more light they have, the more condemned they are for not responding. And the Bible does indicate in some places, for example, in Ezekiel, that he tells Ezekiel to do all these signs and say all these things.

He says, now if they believe you or if they don't believe you, they'll at least know that a prophet was there. They might not believe you. They may not receive what you have to say.

Isaiah was told that people would not believe what he had to say, but he was supposed to say it anyway. Well, why? Why say it if they're not going to believe? Apparently, part of God's desire is that when people are condemned, they might know that they are condemned by the fact that they cannot claim that they didn't have an opportunity to know. God has given them signs, given them prophets, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

If they're going to die in unbelief, he wants them to die in rebellious unbelief, not in ignorant unbelief. He'd rather have them die believers. But there are people who simply won't believe no matter what you say to them.

But he doesn't want any unbeliever on the Day of Judgment to say, well, I never really

had a chance. The reason I died an unbeliever is because I never knew. I was quite innocent of this matter.

And God said, no, I'm not going to let anyone have that excuse. Whether they believe or not, they will know that a prophet has come. They will not be ignorant.

And so, Paul might be saying that what Isaiah is telling these people is that they're going to die ignorant and unbelievers, but God's going to speak to them in dramatic ways, even with people of other tongues. It will not convert them, even for all that they will not believe, but it will serve God's purpose of further condemning them, because he's given them yet another sign, which they're rejected. And Paul, some people say, is saying that tongues is such a sign, as it was in Isaiah's day, not the gift of tongues, but the foreign tongues of the Assyrians, through which God was trying to get their attention.

That tongues is like that. It won't convert anyone. And as far as we know, it didn't even convert anyone on the Day of Pentecost.

It got their attention, but Peter spoke in a language everyone understood. It was not the gift of tongues that Peter was using when he preached his sermon on the Day of Pentecost. It was that sermon spoken to them intelligibly in a known language, known to the speaker and the listeners.

It was Greek, that got people saved in great numbers. So, I don't know. Some people feel that's what Paul's saying.

It would make sense of everything, but it's still a little hard to read verse 22 that way. I mean, just the wording doesn't make it obvious that that's what he means. But Paul, in this case, would be saying, as in Isaiah's case, tongues confirmed people in their unbelief, although it was a sign, which means they could not say on the Day of Judgment that they had never seen any signs.

God gave them signs, but not such signs as guaranteed their conversion. Paul would be saying that tongues today is like that. If people come in here speaking in tongues, they're not going to become believers.

They're just going to think you're crazy. But prophecy is not for confirming people as unbelievers, but for producing believers. It's not for unbelievers, but for believers.

By this interpretation, he's not saying it's not for the benefit of unbelievers, but for the benefit of believers. But rather, he's saying it's not to produce unbelievers, but to produce believers. Difficult.

Difficult. But if that were his meaning in verse 22, it would make good sense in the following verses. As it stands, we do not know for sure what Paul meant.

It would be quite stupid, I think, to point to this and say, yeah, Paul couldn't be speaking by the Spirit of God because he contradicted himself here. Here's one of the places where Paul appears to contradict himself, between what he says in verse 22 and what he says in the verses immediately following. We have what looks like a contradiction, but we have similar places elsewhere in Paul which some people think look like contradictions.

As, for instance, in Philippians 3. In Philippians 3, verse 12, he says, Not that I have already attained, or am already perfect, or perfected, but I press on. But down in verse 15 of the same chapter, Philippians 3, 15, he says, Therefore, let us, as many as are mature, have this mind. Now, there's no problem in the New King James, but the word perfected in verse 12 and the word mature in verse 15 are the same Greek word.

And therefore, the King James, which can be translated in both with the same word, namely perfect, brings out what the problem is. Because in verse 12, Paul says, I'm not yet perfect. And then he says in verse 15, Let both of us who are perfect think this way.

Sounds like he's contradicting himself. Well, Paul, you're perfect or you're not perfect. Well, the fact of the matter is, he is both, depending on which way you understand the word.

Perfect has at least three different possible meanings, and it seems to mean one thing in verse 12 and something else in verse 15. One thing I am not willing to do is say that Paul was so stupid as to accidentally contradict himself in the space of three verses. He was not a fool.

Even if he were not writing by inspiration, his basic intelligence would prevent him from making such an error. Therefore, we have to, I think, wisely conclude it was not an error. But Paul knew what he was doing, and he did it for a reason.

And to him it made sense. And hopefully to his listeners. Actually, in that case, it makes sense to me too.

He's saying, I'm not complete, I'm not absolutely finished in my growth, but I am certainly among those that are mature as opposed to those who are immature. In one sense, we are that word in Greek which can mean mature. We can be mature Christians.

But even if we are mature, that doesn't mean we consider ourselves to have reached ultimate perfection. And I think that's what Paul is saying in Philippians 3. Actually, virtually everyone understands it that way who is not just looking for trouble. But if you really wanted to be nasty, you could say, well, Paul seems to contradict himself because he uses the same word in both places.

One place he says he's not that, the other place he seems to indicate he is that. But one thing you have to do when you read the Bible, even if you're a bit critical, you do have to

be fair-minded. You've got to give the guy credit for having at least average intelligence.

And the same thing is true when you come to 1 Corinthians 14 and you have the appearance of a contradiction within the space of two consecutive verses. And you've got to figure, Paul didn't write this in his sleep, you know. He didn't have a momentary lapse of sanity, I trust.

He was awake when he wrote it, and therefore he would have spotted this as a contradiction. I mean, he knew what he meant when he said it, and he would have been able to spot a contradiction as easily as you can. Therefore, we have to assume that we don't have here a contradiction, but we have one of several possibilities.

Either we are not understanding what he meant in one or both of the sections that seem to contradict each other, and if we understood them as he intended them, we'd see there's no contradiction. Or, as Phillips thought, we may have an instance of a textual corruption. We don't have the original, so we don't know if it's been changed.

It's not impossible, but we can't say for sure that it has been. All we can say is in its present form, it's difficult to harmonize what he says in verse 22 with what he goes on to say in verses 23-25. But I am willing to give Paul credit for having said something that made perfectly good sense as he meant it.

And even to suggest a possibility, which we'll never know whether it's the case or not, that there could be a textual corruption here, that either of those suggestions makes a heck of a lot more sense than to say Paul blew it here, Paul made a big mistake, because Paul clearly knew what he meant. That's our problem. We don't fully understand what he meant.

Anyway, moving on to verse 26, we're confronted with further ambiguities. This chapter is full of ambiguities. Now, ambiguities are not false.

Ambiguities are challenges to our understanding, because an ambiguity means it could mean one thing or it could mean another thing, and it's not all that clear. In my opinion, some of them are insoluble from this point in time. I mean, here we are 20 centuries after Paul's time in an entirely different culture, not at all eyewitnesses of the situation to which he was writing.

And it's like listening to one end of a telephone conversation. I mean, the person who's conversing and the person he's conversing with on the other end of the line, they follow the train of thought quite perfectly. But we're just listening to one side.

We don't have the whole frame of reference to give us the full understanding. We're just having to fill in the blanks, in a sense, by guesswork. So, I mean, we're stuck in a situation here where we can get basically what Paul's concern is, but the specifics to which he refers would be familiar to his readers, but unfortunately they're not entirely

familiar to us.

However, we can do our best to examine the possibilities, and that's all that I can purport to do in my treatment of it here. Verse 26, How is it then, brethren, whenever you come together, each one of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.

But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. Okay, Paul gives some instruction, we could say some regulation, for conduct and use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the gathering of the believers. The first thing that's not altogether clear is what he means in verse 26, whether what he is saying is descriptive or prescriptive.

Now, I've used those words before in teaching on other passages, so I hope you remember what it means to have to decide whether a passage is descriptive or prescriptive. We have to deal with that question in the book of Acts a great deal, for example, because we'll read of some practice of the early church, and some will conclude, well, that is normative, we need to do that in the modern church. That is understanding the passage as prescriptive.

That is, when you see what they did, it's taken as a prescription for what we should do. On the other hand, you could read the same passage and say, well, that's simply descriptive. It's not telling us what we ought to do, it's just telling us what they did do.

This is what they did. There's no imperative here that we have to do it, it's just telling us what they did. And that's a real challenge in studying, for instance, the book of Acts or any passage which gives us sort of a description of how things were done in any particular place.

The question then becomes, were they done that way because it always should be done that way? If so, then we have to take the passage as prescriptive. It's prescribing the right way to do things. But maybe they were doing it for some other reason.

Maybe they were doing it even when they shouldn't be doing it, but it's just describing what they were doing, maybe for the purpose of critiquing it. Well, that's always a possibility too, and there are times when we can easily solve that problem, other times it takes a little more of our devotion to study to figure it out. In this case, most

charismatics that I know believe that 1 Corinthians 14, 26 is prescriptive, that Paul is actually advocating the thing that he's describing here.

How is it then, brethren, whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. Now, Paul obviously doesn't say anything forbidding them to have this attitude, but the wording does not necessarily command or advocate it either.

He's just saying this is how it is when you come together. He's describing what the Corinthians were already doing. Now, if he wanted them to continue doing it, whether he wanted other churches to do it and so forth, it doesn't even enter into his wording here.

He doesn't say, this is what I want you to do when you come together. This is what I want each of you to have something to share, something to say. Yet this is the way that we commonly have, I think, been taught it in charismatic circles.

And it's especially usually tried to apply to small groups, since obviously if you have a room full of 300 or 500 or more worshippers, you're not going to expect in the time that you have for your meeting for everyone to say something. Or for everyone to have something relevant to say that the Lord wants said, because you're probably not going to have time for everyone to do it in a meeting. But sometimes this scripture is applied to small group meetings in modern charismatic circles, that when we come together in small groups, we'd like everyone to have something to contribute.

Some blessing, something to read that blessed you, some scripture, some insight God's given you, a testimony or something. And this is considered to be the normal body life in the modern charismatic congregation. And believed to be so because that's what they thought Paul was saying was normative of early body life.

Maybe so. He does not condemn their attitude in very obvious condemning words. But I have to point out to you, all he says is this is what it is like when you come together.

How is it? It's like this. You come together, everyone has something they want to say. Everyone wants to talk.

Everyone wants to contribute something. Now, the one thing he does say at the end of that description of what they wanted to do or what they did, he said, let all things be done for edification. Now, in a sense, he might be saying, let all the things you want to do be done.

Everyone share a psalm, everyone share a revelation or something like that, as long as it's edifying. And, you know, perhaps that is possible in some smaller groups. It would seem impossible for it to be done in a larger group.

And Paul does seem to put some limits on it in the following verses that we also read

about those who speak in tongues, those who prophesy, how many should do it, two or three of each. Now, some have felt that when Paul says, let the tongue speakers be two or three and then an interpretation, and let the prophets speak two or three and then the others judge, that he's not limiting the number of tongue speakers and prophets that can speak in the whole meeting. But let's not get a whole lineup of them without stopping to interpret once in a while.

Let's have two or three people speak in tongues and then stop and get some interpretation going. Have maybe two or three prophecies and then we'll stop and examine those and judge those. And after that, we can go on and take a few more.

The passage would allow either one. The passage, the wording, could imply that he is not saying that only two or three people should speak in tongues or prophesy in the church, but only two or three in sequence, without taking time out to interpret or to examine what's been said. Though, I must say, I have to admit my own subjectivity in this, I personally think he is limiting it to how many should speak in the entire church.

It's hard to know how the church could benefit from very many more than two or three prophecies. I have found if you have too many messages of different sorts in one meeting, you tend to remember the last one and forget the ones before. If you have too many diverse things happening, eventually they're going to water each other down to the point where nothing is going to stand out uniquely and powerfully in your memory.

That's a subjective judgment on my part and I could be wrong, but we don't know Paul to be saying anything other than that. All we can say is that Paul is clearly arguing for orderliness and for such a conduct in the use of the gifts as to guarantee edification. That you don't get too many people speaking in tongues without someone interpreting it.

Because if you get a whole bunch of tonguespeaking going on, no interpretations, the church meeting is counterproductive. It's not producing the edification of the body as a whole that it's intended to have. I would point this out, I said so earlier in another lecture also, when we were talking about some other chapters.

It's entirely possible that these instructions were custom made or tailor made for the Corinthian church. Because of the particular disorderliness of their conduct when Paul wrote to them. That he put tighter restrictions upon them than he would have if they were already conducting themselves in a more mature and orderly way.

For example, if a church was quite orderly and quite in control and there was no confusion. And yet say four or five tonguespeakers spoke or four or five prophets spoke in the meeting. And there was proper interpretation and so forth.

I doubt, I mean again subjective, I doubt that Paul would have written to them saying, listen four or five is just too much. Make it only two or three. I don't know that there's

something sacrosanct about the exact number of people who do it.

Whether it's two or three or four or five or ten. I really don't think Paul's devoted to a particular number so much as he's devoted to getting things into order. And these people are so out of control that he puts very strict controls upon them.

Now, notice he says at the end of verse 26, let all things be done for edification. And at the end of the chapter in verse 40 he says, let all things be done decently and in order. These would have to be the overriding transcendent principles that are Paul's essential concern in giving these instructions.

Remember when we talked about chapter 11 with the head covering thing. Certainly not everyone in the body of Christ would agree with the conclusions I reached on that. But my conclusion was that a concern for the observation of the hierarchical structure that God has designed in creation, which includes special roles of men and women with reference to each other and so forth.

This is an important thing. This is transcendent. This is an enduring transcendent spiritual truth.

The wearing of head coverings, however, was more of a cultural, temporal expression of that particular truth. And so my conclusion, which again doesn't agree with everybody's, but on 1 Corinthians 11 was, it is not necessary for women today in all cultures like our own to necessarily wear a head covering in order to be obedient to the spirit of what Paul's saying. Because we have a different culture and the expectations are different and Paul's instructions were conditioned by the culture of the time.

But there was a transcendent truth that underlay his instructions and that was that he did not want women casting off their role as women or offending the culture by pretending to be other than submitted to their proper role. Likewise here, we could say that Paul's instructions to the Corinthians are concerned about these transcendent truths which must always prevail in Christian worship services, namely that all things done for edification, as verse 26 says, and as verse 40 says, all things are done decently and in order. Now as far as the number of tongues speakers, the number of prophets and stuff, that, like the head covering thing, may be more of a particular instruction as applies to that particular church because of their own circumstances.

I don't know. I will say this. I don't see any reason that we couldn't conform to the letter of what Paul says here.

Even if we suspect that Paul would not be outraged by a church service which had five prophets speak, so long as everything was done decently and in order. Again, the concern is for decency and order. I do not know.

I'm not willing to go on record as saying that Paul is concerned that all church meetings

have no more than three prophets speak or more than three. But the Corinthian church needs some very specific restrictions because they were not judging themselves. They had to be judged externally.

They had to be controlled by external controls because, as a bunch of babies say, we're not internally controlled. That's a mark of immaturity, of course. Babies don't have any internal controls.

They don't behave okay by internal motivations. That's why they have parents to impose external controls. But one of the marks that a person is mature in reaching a state of maturity is that they become independent of external controls.

This independence is not just by rebelling against them but by developing the internal controls that render unnecessary external controls. You understand what I mean? Kids have to be told to brush their teeth because that's the right thing to do. They wouldn't do it on their own.

Eventually they get to a place where they're responsible enough and they can weigh the right and wrong and the value of things enough that they don't need to be told to brush their teeth. They do that on purpose. And it's not even just because of ingrained habits.

It's because they know the reasons for it and appreciate the reasons. And they do it without being told because they put themselves under that discipline. And I think, since the church was clearly immature and babes in Christ, that it was one of the evident things in the church that they didn't have any internal controls.

And so Paul, as their father, as he called himself in chapter 4, he said, You may have 10,000 instructors but only one father in the faith because I have begotten you. He comes in like a disciplinarian. Remember at the end of chapter 4, shall I come with a rod? He's coming as a disciplinarian, imposing external controls on a church that should have had internal controls.

Now, once again, it raises questions as to whether these particular external controls that Paul was putting on would be required in a church that was already internally mature and controlled. I mean, I mentioned in a previous lecture that this has ramifications with reference to the common charismatic and Pentecostal practice of what's usually called singing in the spirit as a corporate group. Technically, Paul forbade that in Corinth.

I mean, he only allowed speakers in tongues to speak one at a time and not without an interpretation. But we also know he was very concerned about the disorderly conduct of the church in general. I think most of us have probably been in churches where people sang in tongues as a whole congregation where the overall impression was not a madhouse.

Where an unbeliever coming in wouldn't say, These people are crazy. He might be

perplexed, might not know what's going on, but there's a certain beauty and orderliness to it which commends itself as not really a scandal to the name of Christ. Now, I'm not saying that I can say for sure that this is okay.

What I'm saying is, I'm not sure I could use these scriptures to forbid it. As some people would, because I see Paul's concern is for decency and orderliness in the church. And he gives specific instructions to this particular church, addressing their condition, which put them under strict restrictions.

But this may be essentially the same kind of chapter as we have in chapter 11 where there's some overall principles that need to be observed by everybody but the particular observation in Corinth had to involve women covering their heads and so forth. Okay. Enough said.

Now, let me just try to explain what I think he's saying in part of this passage which is obscure. The part about speakers in tongues, I think it's fairly self-explanatory. Maybe not entirely.

He says in verse 27, If anyone speaks in a tongue, let it be two or three at the most, each in turn, in other words, not all at once but one at a time, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church and let him speak to himself and to God. Now, this particular verse, verse 28, raises the question, well, how do you know if there's an interpreter or not? After all, in verse 13 he said, If a person speaks in tongues, let him pray that he may interpret.

Presumably, if Paul's instructions are followed, everyone who speaks in tongues would pray that they might interpret, in which case there would be certainly an interpreter there. And how, you know, if an utterance in tongues might come from anybody in a congregation, and likewise an interpretation might come from just anybody in a congregation, how would you know in advance of giving the utterance whether somebody is going to interpret or not? I think that the statement, if there's no interpreter present, gives us some insight into the way Paul views the gifts of the Spirit. There were, in fact, some individuals who possessed a recognized gift of tongues and others who possessed a recognized gift of interpretation.

Now, when we talk about the recognized gift of tongues, I'm speaking of that as a ministry to the congregation as opposed to a private devotional language for prayer. We're talking about just as there were prophets and teachers and so forth. Anyone might teach, but there were teachers in the church who were recognized as teachers.

That's what they were there for. That was their principal contribution they made. It appears to me from Paul's language there were people in the church known as interpreters.

That was the principal gifting that was recognized to reside in them. Now, it's possible that another individual who wasn't so recognized might on an occasion give an interpretation legitimately. But it appears to me that in the church there were people who obtained recognition for being the ones who were, you know, in a sense authorized to speak in tongues.

And when they did, it was considered these people have the genuine gift. You don't have to wonder. And on the other hand, likewise, there were some recognized as interpreters.

And when they would interpret, it was regarded as authentic because they were seen as authentic interpreters. And it would be, I mean, otherwise, verse 28 is nonsensical. You can't make anything of it.

If interpretation is just a spontaneous thing that might come up from anyone in the congregation after a tongue is given, then how could the person contemplating whether to speak in tongues or not know in advance whether an interpreter is present? He'd have to declare buoyant or have the gift of prophecy, in which case he'd be better off prophesying and speaking in tongues in the first place. I think what this shows us is that Paul expected the church to know who in the church were interpreters. He doesn't say someone interpreted, you know, having the gift of interpretation, just as an interpreter, as if that's a title, a recognized office, a recognized position, or giftedness in the church.

So that verse 28, I believe, does sort of pull the curtain a little bit and reveals something behind the scenes of the presuppositions of the early church, that there were people who had this gift and it was known who they were. And if they weren't there that particular meeting, might as well just be quiet, because you couldn't be sure that your tongue would be interpreted and thus bring edification to the church. Now coming to the section on prophets, we have further ambiguity.

Verses 29 through 32, almost every verse in it has something that could be interpreted one way or in a very different way. Verse 29, let two or three prophets speak and let the others judge. Now a question arises, who are the others? Is it referring to everybody else in the congregation, that everybody is to be judging prophecy? Or is it the other prophets? Again, if there were recognized interpreters, there might be recognized prophets.

In fact, it's likely that there were, since Paul indicated at the end of chapter 12 that not everyone was an apostle, not everyone was a prophet. Chapter 12, verse 29, are all apostles, are all prophets, are all teachers? Obviously, some were recognized as apostles, some were recognized as teachers, some were recognized as prophets. So there were some in the church that made up a prophetic group.

And it's possible that what Paul means here is let two or three of the members of the prophetic group speak and let the others in the prophetic group judge. And the judging

here, the Greek word is the same as that of discern or discerning, found in 1 Corinthians 12, 10, which is the gift of discerning of spirits. And spirits would here be a reference to the prophetic utterances themselves.

So just as the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation might reside in the same person, or there might be, as it were, a group of people in the church known to be tongue speakers and interpreters, and the two gifts were kind of in the same circle, they complemented each other, there might well have been a group in the church that were prophets, some of whom, at a given meeting, would prophesy, others would discern, would judge. Either possibility would fit the wording of the passage. Either a few prophets speak and everyone else in the whole congregation discerns and judges, or else it's speaking about in the group of prophets.

Some will speak, the others will sit in judgment of what is spoken and discerning. Going on, it says in verse 30, Now, you can all prophesy one by one, in verse 31, could mean everyone in the church, though I'm not sure. Again, if he's speaking instructions to a group in the church who are prophets, he might be saying to them, each of you will have your turn.

Only two or three per meeting, but there are many meetings, and one by one, in the proper time, everyone will get a chance. Or, as I say, he may be speaking more generally to the whole church. Everyone can prophesy one at a time.

But apparently not all at the same meeting, because he wants there to be two or three, it would appear, in the meeting. Now, verse 30 is interesting, intriguing, because it says, Well, who is the first? The first is someone who is prophesying. So, you've got prophets speaking, one at a time, two or three, but here you've got a guy speaking, and something is revealed to somebody else, and the guy who is speaking is supposed to shut up and let the second guy speak.

Now, that almost makes it sound like prophets can interrupt each other. You know, if I'm prophesying and something is revealed to someone else, I can be interrupted mid-sentence, I'm supposed to hold my peace and let him talk. Now, at one level, that doesn't make very much sense, because that would almost be the opposite of what Paul wants to happen to me.

He doesn't want interruptions and conflicts and things like that. He wants things orderly, and after all, if the first prophet is given a real utterance, why should he allow himself to be interrupted? Why can't the second person who gets something revealed to him just wait for the first guy to quit? Let him finish what he's saying, and then let the next guy speak in his turn. Now, that's the first impression I always had about the passage, and I would imagine most people would have, that Paul seems to be saying, if a second prophet gets a revelation, he should interrupt the first guy, and the first guy has just got to shut up and let the second guy talk.

But that raises questions as well. Why should the first guy not finish what he had to say if he had something from God? And why shouldn't the second guy be able to maintain his control over himself until the other guy quits, and then, in an orderly fashion, give his word? Well, I think very probably the solution is this, that in fact, Paul probably is picturing a group of prophets in the church, in a meeting, and among them, two or three are permitted to give an utterance. The others in the group of prophets are discerning, and as they are sitting in discernment, sitting by, if one of them gets an insight, a discernment, about the person's prophecy who is speaking, presumably a discernment that it is not authentic, then he is to interrupt and say, I'm sorry, brother, that does not bear witness, we do not believe that that is from God.

That would explain why the speaker would be rightly interrupted. That would explain why he should hold his peace. The assumption being, he just said the others are supposed to sit in judgment of what is being said, and if something is revealed, I take that to mean to those who are sitting in judgment.

They are judging the prophethood, and they discern something, and they go, oh, wait a minute, something is wrong here, this is not God's word for this meeting right now, we do not accept that. Then the first one isn't supposed to just keep going and try to shout down the objectors. He is supposed to subject himself, submit himself, keep silent, to the judgment that has been made of him.

And then, in verse 32, it says, and the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. I always understood this, growing up, to mean, I mean, in the charismatic movement since I was 16, I always thought this meant, and almost every commentary seems to support this notion, that the spirit of the prophets is subject to the prophets, means that the gift of prophecy is under the full control of the will of the person prophesying. In other words, that the gift of prophecy does not impose itself and force a person to prophesy, but even when God gives a person a gift, a spirit of prophecy, it is still subject to the possessor, it is still subject to the man himself.

And Paul's reason for saying this would be under this interpretation, that the man is told to keep silent, but suppose he objects, I can't stop now, God's just speaking to me, I have no power to quit. I'll keep silent. Paul would say, no, you can't.

You have control over the situation. The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophets. And Paul would thus be saying, you can't claim to be out of control, you have to stop if you're told to stop, because your gift is under your control.

And this verse has been applied to other gifts too, understood that way. Now, I would challenge that interpretation today. One thing I would say is there are cases in the Bible where prophets did go into trance, in the Old Testament anyway, and as far as I know the gift of prophecy is not really a different gift in the New than in the Old.

Guys like Balaam, he'd go into a trance when he prophesied, and the spirit of God would give him words that he had no control over. He actually wanted to curse Israel, but every time he went into this trance, words of blessing that he didn't want to get came out. Amos the prophet said, the Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? As if he's saying, who can hold back? Who has control over the situation? If God speaks to a prophet, how could he not speak it? That's Amos chapter 3, verse 8. Amos 3, 8. A lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy? It almost sounds like if you've got the word burning in you, you can hardly keep it in.

Jeremiah, I don't remember the passage number, you might recall, he got tired of being persecuted for being a prophet. And he said, I've determined I'm never going to speak any more than the Lord. I'm not going to do it.

I'm tired of this. I'm not going to give any more words of the Lord. But he says, but the word of the Lord was in me like a fire that burned and I couldn't hold my peace.

Now, these kinds of things give me the impression that maybe a genuine gift of prophecy doesn't always leave the prophet in full control. It sounds like the prophet often is compelled to speak. And sometimes, as in the case of Balaam, who went into an actual trance when he prophesied, he had no control over what he was saying.

Even the choice of words he had no control over, or even the content in any way. And therefore, for Paul to say, as if it's a given, well, the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet, and mean by that, a person who's got a gift of prophecy has full control over it. One wonders, how does that conform to what we know about the gift of prophecy in the rest of Scripture? Now, I'll tell you what I think it probably means now, and I can't prove it, but it's just an alternative that makes good sense to me.

When he says in verse 32, the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophets, I think what he means by that is the utterances of the prophets, which are being judged by the other prophets, they are subject to the judgment of the prophetic group. That is, the individual prophetic speeches are subject to, that is, they are to be judged by, and submit to the judgment of, the group of prophets who are judging them. So, it wouldn't be saying anything about the individual prophet's control over his gift, although it may well be that prophets do have some control, in many cases, over it.

But it wouldn't be given an axiom, which would not necessarily square with the evidence about prophecy elsewhere in Scripture, but it would be more in connection with the whole thing he's saying here. You've got a group of prophets. Two or three of them can speak in a meeting, one at a time, and let the others judge.

While one is speaking, if those who are sitting by discerning, discern something that requires that they interrupt the guy and say, wait a minute here, that's not of God, he has to hold his peace. Why? Because his prophetic gift is subject to the judgment of the

prophetic community in the church. The judgment of the other prophets who are discerning what he's saying, he has to submit himself to it, because the utterances of the prophets are subject to the judgment and the control of the prophets in the church, the group of prophets.

Now, that might be a very different interpretation of these verses than you're acquainted with, and it may not be the right one, but I give you that to consider. I think there's much to be said for that possibility. Verse 33.

That's one thing that's universal. It may not be that all the churches of the saints have only two or three prophets speak every time they meet, but all of them observe this overall transcendent truth, and that is God's not the author of confusion. God is the author of peace, and that's true universally in the churches.

Verse 34. I might as well read the next verse. If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.

Just to put a little weight there on the instructions. Particularly on the instructions of verses 34 and 35, which apparently need a little weight on them, because people challenge this all the time. In fact, modern Christians challenge it all the time.

They say, that can't be really true. That was Paul's own pharisaical prejudices coming back out from his past against women and so forth. Well, you can say that if you want to.

But according to Paul, if you do not acknowledge that what he says is the commandment of the Lord, you disqualify yourself as being regarded as a spiritual person or a prophet. If anyone regards himself as spiritual or a prophet, and a fair number of people in Corinth did, think of themselves that way, He says, then he can prove it by acknowledging that what I've just said to you is the commandment of the Lord. Now, what is it that he's just said? He has said that women should keep silent in the churches.

How are we to understand that? Earlier, in chapter 11, he seemed to approve of women praying and prophesying with their head covering. Now, true, he didn't specify that he meant in the church. Though, it seems most likely that that's where the praying and prophesying, the verbal praying and prophesying was taking place when the church died, especially the prophesying.

My impression, and of course we're left to have conflicting impressions sometimes about things, different people see different things there in what is ambiguous, but I have the feeling that Paul didn't require women to be absolutely silent and do nothing and say nothing in church. I think that he did allow prayer and prophecy on the part of women. By the way, that's not any small thing.

Prophecy is the greatest gift, he said, that could edify the church. If a woman is

permitted to prophesy, I'm not sure why she'd complain that she's not allowed to do anything important, since prophecy is, as Paul indicated, one of the greatest gifts that should be sought by all. The things most valuable to the church, God, in fact, did allow women to do it, it would have seemed, if they were properly submitted and, in that case, covered with their heads covered.

But there is something that Paul did not allow them to do. Now, in saying, let your women keep silent, they're not permitted to speak, and also, in the end of verse 35, it's a shame for women to speak in the church, we can either take that in the absolute sense, in which case we have to ask, why did Paul then seem to let them speak under certain conditions in chapter 11, and maybe be left without a good answer to that question, or else we can say, well, Paul is speaking about a particular problem in Corinth, where the women's speaking was causing a problem, and he's telling them to stop doing that. It's shameful, it's causing disruption, it's bad.

Now, as you know, I do not think that all the things in the Bible that restrict women's behavior in the church are culture-bound, I certainly don't believe that. I believe that what Paul taught about women's roles presents an abiding, universal difference between the roles of men and women in the church. I believe that, for instance, when Paul forbade a woman to teach and usurp authority over a man, in 1 Timothy chapter 2, that this effectively precludes women being elders or pastors of churches at any time in history.

Now, some people don't like that view and don't agree with me, but you know that that's my position, and therefore I'm not one to water down Paul's teaching about women. I have no problem with the traditional roles of women, I do not have any intimidation from feminists who would find offensive the position I take. Therefore, what I say here, I want you to know, is not coming from any desire to water down anything, it's just a desire to understand what's going on in Paul's mind and what he's saying, what it is he's actually trying to communicate.

I believe that there's evidence in this passage that women were disrupting the church in Corinth in some manner. His instructions to them at the beginning of verse 35 suggest maybe they were asking questions all the time. They may have been interrupting the speaker with questions about everything.

Now, realize that women sometimes didn't have as much education as men in that society, and for that reason, they might have found some things harder to understand than the men did. The men, in many cases, might be more literate, or simply more worldly wise, or more theologically wise, easily, than the women, whose role, most times, was in the home. They didn't have books at home.

I mean, we didn't have printing presses. So, it's not like today where a woman can read good theological or devotional material at home. They were at home raising the kids,

and they didn't really have much to build a sophisticated understanding of spiritual things.

Therefore, they were finding it perhaps more difficult than the men were to understand some of the stuff that was being said in the church. I admit there's a certain amount of guesswork in this scenario I'm framing, but I'm trying to build it upon the data in the text. It seems like there was a disruption in the church caused by women asking questions a lot.

Now, some have even said, and I'm not saying this is so, but it's very common to hear preachers say this, that in Corinth, the women and the men sat on separate sides or in different parts of the building. This is the way synagogue services were laid out, and some feel like this is practiced in the early church as well. We have no sureness of it, but there are some who say it as if it's absolutely true.

If this was true, of course, if women were on one side of the room and men on the other, and the women were asking their husbands questions during the service, they'd have to do so either by getting up and crossing the room, which they probably were not allowed to do if indeed there was a strict isolation of men and women, or they'd have to actually speak across the room to their husbands, which, I mean, if the meeting was chaotic in general anyway, they might think nothing of it. I mean, if it was a quiet, reverent service, such as most of us are acquainted with, one can hardly imagine a woman being so gauche as to scream across the room to her husband to ask him a question about the sermon. But, I mean, if the Corinthian services were a madhouse anyway, then it might not have been unthinkable that women were saying, hey, well, everyone else is doing their own thing, I'm going to ask my husband something.

I personally would not go on record as saying that the men and women sat separately in the church meeting. They may have, they may not have. I don't know that for certain.

I've read commentaries, but I'm not sure what basis they have for saying so. I will say this, though. There is evidence from the passage that women were asking their husbands questions.

And if they were doing this a great deal, it could have been caused, you know, well, let me put it this way. My kids sometimes ask me questions in church, and I'm mindful of the fact that if someone's speaking, even if my kids are whispering, they're whispering loud enough for me to hear them, it's loud enough for people behind me to hear them. If every woman in the church was doing that with their husband, you hear this, and maybe they were not even being careful to whisper, you'd have this dull roar of whispering and talking going on during the service while someone's trying to preach, someone's trying to get something across, and there'd be this tremendously distracting phenomenon of women off and on throughout the service asking their husbands questions about it.

And that is perhaps the kind of noise, the kind of disruption that Paul is saying women should not do. Let them be quiet. If they have questions, let them ask their husbands about it at home.

Now, a certain amount of conjecture affixes to this interpretation, but I think it's reasonable. There are other possibilities. One possibility that I do not give much credit to, but which the evangelical feminists always resort to, is they say that verses 34 and 35 are in no way part of Paul's teaching.

But those verses actually represent Paul introducing an anticipated objection coming from some chauvinistic male pigs in the church who want to keep the women down, but Paul doesn't. That Paul, they say, evangelical feminists, half the time they're trying to get Paul on their side and say, he thought like we do. Then on other passages they say, now these are coming from his prejudices.

They try to have it both ways. Some of the time they try to deny that Paul's restricting women's behavior. Other times they admit he is, but figure, well, that's his prejudices from the background or his culture.

Seems like you can't have it both ways. Either Paul freely liberated women as much as modern feminists do, or else he didn't. And if he didn't, then you have to decide, did he not do it because of his hang-ups or did he not do it because God told him to restrict them? That's another situation to discuss.

Here, however, evangelical feminists universally put quotation marks around the entirety of verses 34 and 35 as if Paul is quoting here somebody with whom he does not agree. Some male chauvinist who doesn't want the women saying anything in church, even legitimate things, prophecies, prayers, and such things as they might really legitimately offer. Some men just don't like women talking.

And so it's as if Paul is introducing here an objection like someone speaks up and says, Ah, but let your women keep silent in church, for they're not permitted to speak. Doesn't the law even say the same thing? And if they want to learn something, let them ask at home, for it's shameful for women to speak in church. And that Paul's response to that is in verse 36.

He says, did the word of God come originally from you? And you is in the masculine. So the feminists say, he's saying, you men alone? Or was it only you, to you that it reached, you men? So that Paul would be correcting the information in verses 34 and 35, that we have some kind of an old-fashioned traditionalist speaking in verses 34 and 35, and Paul's correcting and saying, what, you men think you've got the corner on the market of insights? Why should women not be allowed to speak? And this is how the evangelical feminists understand it. So much so that if you get, for instance, the new RSV, the new Revised Standard Version, they actually have factory-installed quotation marks around

verses 34 and 35, because that is the New Feminist Bible, it's the gender-neutral Bible, and so forth.

They want to get rid of the gender-specific language about God and Christ and so forth. And they have followed the party line, which is a very clear party line of the evangelical feminists, to put all that in parentheses, or in quotation marks. Now, the problem I have with that is, while I acknowledge that Paul sometimes did, in his argument, insert probably an objection, quoting somebody that he didn't agree with, in order to answer them, all the times he's done that previously have been real short things.

Like, all things are lawful to me. Or, like in Romans, shall we sin that grace may abound? I mean, short representations of a view he wants to come against. Or, who has resisted his will? How can God find fault? Is God unfaithful then? These kinds of things Paul anticipates sometimes his objective to bring up, but they're always short.

And they never have the appearance of an extended piece of instruction. They're more like a short summary of what someone might think, answered by a somewhat long explanation. Where here, if they are right, then all of verses 34 and 35 are an extended argument of someone Paul doesn't agree with, and he gives a very short answer in verse 36.

It doesn't have the appearance of being correct. Besides, Paul did say in another place, and no one disputes it, he said it there, in 1 Timothy 2, that women should be quiet in the church. And that's what's being said here, so I don't think he disagrees.

One question is, where in the law does it say it, as also says the law? Well, in Genesis 3.16, it says of the woman that her husband shall rule over her. And that could be what he's referring to. She is to be submissive, as the law also says.

Again, we have something universal and something maybe specific to this church. Namely, universally, women are supposed to be submissive in their role as wife and husband. But specifically, they're going to have to stop talking in the church occurrence, where they're causing a disruption and save their questions for later when they get home with their husbands.

Certainly, the subject deserves longer treatment than that. However, our tape and our time clock does not provide such time.